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# Fair to Middlin': How the Mediocre White Male Trope as the Exemplar of Human Experience and Universal Truth Fails to Adequately Prepare the Diverse Field of Contemporary Actors and Audiences in Film, Television and Theatre Today

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Fair to Middlin': How the Mediocre White Male Trope as the Exemplar of Human Experience and  
Universal Truth Fails to Adequately Prepare the Diverse  
Field of Contemporary Actors and Audiences in Film, Television and Theatre Today

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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in  
Film and Theatre

by

Shanda Quintal

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To Mom...I made it, Momma. Thank you for keeping me strong while I finished what I set out to do. I love you.

To Daddy and Linda...I love you both with everything I have. Thank you for being who you are so that I could be who I am.

To my children...thank you for the all sacrifices that only you and I know. I love you in ways that only a mother can.

To my ancestors - my grands and greats...We did it y'all!

To all of my friends who have been a part of my village, my tribe, my girls...I chose you and would choose you again. Thank you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Non-traditional casting has been a controversial practice in film, television and theatre that was implemented to offer people of color and women opportunities which had previously been available to white or male performers. The following is a case study documenting the process by which I have discovered that non-traditional casting as a practice contributes to the oppression of people of color as well as supports the status quo of the white patriarchy. This case study is analyzed from the historical, sociological, psychological and philosophical theories and ideologies relevant to the unsuccessful attempt of a female actor of African-American descent at portraying a white, Evangelical, male minister. It concludes with an invitation and an approach to making better people.

Keywords: Non-traditional casting, Theatre; Film; Acting; African-American; White male patriarchy; Oppression

## **ANYONE CAN PLAY ANYTHING EXCEPT...**

In doing research for a role in which I was having extraordinary difficulty trying to create, I encountered an archived New York Times piece written by theatre critic Mel Gussow in which he interviewed theatre guru Peter Brook, who at the time was in the middle of the run of his Paris production of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. While discussing his casting process and his decision not to exclusively use the actors from his own international theatre company, Mr. Brook stated that "The very basis of an international theatre company is that anyone can play anything. Blacks play white and young play old." In such theatre companies, every actor brings a different background, and therefore perspective, to the collaborative art of theatre. However, even under this paradigm, there was an exception to the rule in his mind. Mr. Brook went on to clarify, "But there are degrees of obligations, correspondence and physique in Chekhov. Every actor has a different background and story, but they have several things in common: a degree of aptness physically and a level of competence with Chekhov. They are experienced professionals who have not lost their innocence, their knowledge of what first brought them into the theater. But I could not advertise: open call for innocent actors."

(NewYorkTimes.com)

At first reading, this explanation of why Mr. Brook decided to create a new theatre company specifically to tackle *The Cherry Orchard*, the canonical masterpiece of Anton Chekhov, seemed rather logical and innocuous. Professionalism in art, as in any activity, elevates the craft. Yet there was more to his statements than simply elevating theatre as an art-form. Inherent in his declaration is a judgement of worthy and not worthy with regard to "international" actors as compared to western actors. To further elucidate his seeming intentions, it must be stated that Peter Brook created the International

Center for Theatre Research in Paris as a conduit for the exploration of the various languages and cultures of theatre traditions, as illustrated in this interview with Richard Schechner:

SCHECHNER: When in 1970 you began the International Centre for Theatre Research [sic] in Paris you started working with non-English speaking actors from several cultures - African, Asian, American, European. Why did you form this kind of company?

BROOK: The big step came in 1965 when within the Royal Shakespeare Company a group emerged exploring the "other languages" of theater...I began exploring also the possibility - and techniques - of exchange among people of different cultures. Then in 1968, at the invitation of Jean-Louis Barrault, head of the Theatre de Nations, I went to Paris to direct a workshop with people from different cultures with very different backgrounds.

In that workshop I saw some very special possibilities. Yoshi Oida and Barry Stanton worked on *The Tempest*, one playing Ferdinand and the other Miranda, so there was a change of sex, of size, of language. I saw as Henry Ford might have said that geography is bunk.

Each human being carries within her/him all the continents, but each only knows one of them. So when a person with one known continent and a mass of dark continents meets someone else whose condition is the same, and they communicate, there is an illumination for each. (Talking with Peter Brook 54)



It is apparent to me that the significance of Peter Brook's one exception to his philosophy of "anyone can play anything" being Anton Chekhov is indicative of a larger conundrum with which the world at large is now reckoning. The root cause of this dire predicament and its ramifications in acting in theatre, film, and television are explored in this document. Based upon the theory by George W. Albee that states that the oppressive and violent colonization of non-white cultures resulted in the ideology of white cultural superiority and conversely the cultural inferiority of non-whites, I contend that theatre, an art-form that was created to tell the stories of what it means to be human, has defined the limited, white male experience as the universal truth for all of mankind. Thus, this false premise of white cultural superiority coupled with the resulting unwarranted belief in the innate authority of white men have simultaneously created both the disdain of the arts and cultures of people of color as well as the cultural appropriation of these same groups. Furthermore, it is this disdain and appropriation of the culture of people of color that has been the impetus for the current explosion of artistic expression created by and for people of color, specifically people of color in theatre. To support my contention, I will refer to some of the incidences that have occurred throughout the three years I attended the Master of Fine Arts program in the Film and Theatre Department of the University of New Orleans. Additionally, I will provide accounts of my experiences from my past that led me to an impasse in an exercise of non-traditional casting for the role of "Walter" from the play *Keely and Du*.

I maintain that the two false premises of white superiority and inherent male authority are intrinsically self-serving for white men, and in particular mediocre to less-than-average white men. To

demonstrate, if one was to plot all white men on a bell curve with a normal distribution and a standard deviation of 1, as on any bell curve with a normal distribution and a standard deviation of 1, the top 15% are superior within the group, the bottom 15% are useless, and the remaining 70% are fair to middlin', as the idiom goes. Benefiting most from these false narratives are mediocre and sub-par white men. (HuffingtonPost.com) Considering that the majority of leadership positions in the United States, be it political, corporate or academic, it can be deduced that the 85% of mediocre and subpar men are benefiting from an erroneous assumption of their competence. For the standard white male, confidence has become a proxy for competence. (Saunders abc.ua) Succinctly epitomizing this phenomenon is a recent quote tweeted from a young Canadian writer Sarah Haji that has been circulating around the internet, "God give me the confidence of a mediocre white dude." (TWITTER)

I reiterate that it is a white males' egomaniacal assumptions that 1) he is undoubtedly deserving of his superiority, 2) his experience is the baseline from which all others be measured, and 3) his competence enables him to continue in the vein of oppression that began with the growth of the British Empire and the subsequent colonization and destabilization of Africa, the Americas, Australia and Asia. Further, I assert it is the recognition of these assumptions and the repercussions that followed, namely the devaluing and subsequent exclusion of people of color from non-musical performing arts that has propelled the theatre, film and television sectors to enact the meager and ineffectual antidote of non-traditional casting. Therefore, it is through this strategy of non-traditional casting that art created with actors, be it in theatre, film or television, under the guise of creating opportunities and equality for

women and people of color continues to uphold the white male patriarchy as well as the support the oppression of the very same people it purports to benefit.

## UNDERTAKING “WALTER”

My assessment of non-traditional casting will be evaluated through the prism of my attempt at my third year MFA thesis project in which I was cast as “Walter” in *Keely and Du*. In September with the school year having already begun, and after much debate within the department, Professor Hoover, the then-chair of the Film and Theatre Department and my Major Professor, decided that out of the four productions that were going up that year, I could use a role from *Keely and Du* as my thesis project. There are three significant roles in the play: “Keely,” a young white pregnant woman in her 20s, “Du,” a white, grandmotherly woman in her 70s, and “Walter,” a white, Evangelical, male minister. None were appropriate for me on the surface. Professor Hoover suggested I play the old white lady. Professor Kalo Gow, who was new to the department that year, recommended a play that would meet the cultural and artistic needs of three out of the four graduate students in the program who were African-Americans, including myself. The play was *Harlem Duet* and it was written by DJanet Sears, also a member of the African diaspora. I believe this would have been an excellent project for the department. This choice also would have given me an opportunity to work on a thesis project that, according to Stella Adler, would resonate because these characters cultural and their history are in my “blood memory,” a term she used to indicate the ease with which an actor is able to portray a character of the same ancestry. (Moss 215)

*Keely and Du* was written by Jane Martin, a (presumably white) female, the pen name of an anonymous playwright which many suspect is Jon Jory, a white male, most notably known as the artistic and producing director of Actors Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky. This performance was supposed to be my final performance in the Film and Theatre Department of the University of New Orleans. It was the performance that was meant to demonstrate that over the course of the three-year

program I had gained, at minimum, a mastery of the art of acting as well as the sufficient knowledge to be able to teach it at the collegiate level. Alas, much to my bewilderment and consternation, I was unable to remember the lines once rehearsals began and I stepped on stage.

Rehearsals began on January 16, 2019 and by January 30, I was asked to leave the production. Initially I resisted but not for very long. I was in my last semester of the MFA program and had an extreme desire to return to my normal life. I was on my last semester and I was close to finishing the program. My fear was that not doing “Walter” would extend my time indefinitely, however that became irrelevant rather quickly. Within 20 minutes, I acquiesced and immediately felt a crushing weight lifting off of me. I could not have been more grateful. I had spent the previous four months trying to memorize the lines and create a character that eluded me. Professor Hoover was my Major Professor. When I consulted him regarding my difficulties, he gave the following two suggestions for tackling “Walter:”

- Memorize my lines by rote, and
- Recognize that the fact that I am an African-American female and “Walter” was a white male was irrelevant in regards to my performance. The only distinction to be acknowledged between me and “Walter” was that he was male and I was female. He insisted, however, that this distinction could be easily overcome by utilizing the “Magic If” technique as described by Constantine Stanislavski. It was a technique taught to me by my acting coach in Los Angeles, Aaron Speiser. As noted, the other difference I mentioned, the fact that I was black and “Walter” was white, he deemed insignificant.

The “Magic If,” technique to which he referred, is one of the main components of the Stanislavski’s acting system which he developed at the Moscow Art Theatre, a theatre which he co-founded with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. (Britannica.com) This technique is considered by proponents of Stanislavski’s essential in an actor’s toolbox, in that it allows an actor to use his or her imagination to discover more about the character he or she is playing. By imagining vividly and in great detail the specific set of given circumstances of a play (or screenplay, as the case may be today) including the characters, the written or inferred history, and the possible outcomes or consequences, an actor is able to imagine how that character would act or react in a certain situations (Stanislavski 69). I regard this ability to imagine the most important tool of an actor in that it allows an actor to connect further with his or her character through empathy which leads to a deeper understanding of the character, a more truthful performance, and more meaningful connection with the audience. Further, I hold that the only qualifier of a successful performance is in whether or not it reveals and honors truth. Other facets of performance, such as strength of voice and fluidity of movement, are measures of the quality of a performance. One can honor the truth of the life of their character and yet still not have developed a stage presence or resounding vocal quality. Conversely, one can have a formidable stage presence and a well-trained, thunderous voice and fail to reveal or honor the truth of the character as well as the truth of the given circumstances. It is my belief that unless an actor can empathize and gain a deep understanding of a character, that actor is unable to honor the truth and successfully connect with an audience. Furthermore, it is my goal as an actor, indeed I regard it as my duty, to connect with my audience, by creating a cathartic experience for them.

Greek philosopher Aristotle considered this catharsis, as well as the arousal of pity and fear that will allow for it, the crucial element of drama. “The Poetics of Aristotle,” his compendium on literature and drama compiled of notes written throughout the mid 4th century BC, is considered the earliest surviving work of literary theory, and at various points throughout history has extensively relied upon in literary critique. Parts of the document that pertain to the poetics of comedy were lost (Aristotle 1) and what remains is his analysis on tragic poetry, or the poetry of tragedy. (31) In this treatise, Aristotle asserts that

Tragedy...is a representation of an action which is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude - in language which is garnished in various forms in its different parts - in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative - and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting [sic] the katharsis of such emotions. (37)

The mechanism or channel by which one affects this catharsis is through mimesis, a basic theoretical principle of representation by which art is created. (Britannica.com)

According to Aristotle,

Poetry in general can be seen to owe its existence to two causes, and these are rooted in nature. First, there is a man’s natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity (and this distinguishes man from other creatures, that he is thoroughly mimetic and through mimesis takes his first steps in understanding). Second, there is the pleasure which all men take in mimetic objects.

Given, then that mimetic activity comes naturally to us - together with melody and rhythm (for it is evident that metres are species of rhythm) - it was originally those with a special natural capacity who, through a slow and gradual process brought poetry into being by their improvisations. (Aristotle 34)

In other words, man by nature is mimetic and learns by mimesis. German education anthropologist Dr. Christoph Wulf reiterates the importance of mimetic learning in cultural education from his 2004 and 2005 German expositions on culture, philosophy and performance of the introduction of his 2008 article “Mimetic Learning,” which has been translated into English. He states:

Mimetic learning, learning by imitation, constitutes one of the most important forms of learning. Mimetic learning does not, however, just denote mere imitation or copying:

Rather, it is a process by which the act of relating to other persons and worlds in a mimetic way leads to an enhancement of one’s own world view, action, and behaviour.

Mimetic learning is productive; it is related to the body, and it establishes a connection between the individual and the world as well as other persons; it creates practical knowledge, which is what makes it constitutive of social, artistic, and practical action.

Mimetic learning is cultural learning, and as such it is crucial to teaching and education.

The above theories and propositions provide the foundation of and support the integrity of my acting which includes intensive, introspective character development designed to offer the audience an



opportunity for a cathartic experience. It is my gift, however, at times it is a curse. In the case of my inability to create a truthful “Walter,” it was both.

## **16 YEARS PREPARING FOR “WALTER”**

At some point midway through the three-year MFA program, my philosophy became “Take the path of least resistance, soldier. Just get the fuck out.” It was my daily mantra. The main reason school became a challenge was that I began my graduate studies at 47 years of age. I can truthfully say that it didn’t seem as absurd at the time as it does at this very moment typing up this document. In fact, at the time, it felt like I was going back to kindergarten where I could resume finger-painting, mid-morning snacks, and napping. I clearly do not have a firm grasp of my age. Undoubtedly, this also applies to my grandiose delusions regarding my abilities because after briefly attending a top 10 law school on academic scholarship in my early 20s, working in the high-tech/dot.com fast paced, marketing and public relations sector in San Francisco and New York in my late 20s, moving to Los Angeles, studying acting and rising to the master class in a highly respected acting studio, marrying, divorcing, moving back to New Orleans and being a single mother of two boys throughout my 30s, and then establishing and developing the first, and in years to come, the largest film industry conference (Film Industry Expo) in the Gulf South in my early 40s, I firmly believed that with all of this life experience, studying theatre and acting in graduate school was going to be child’s play.

One of my first classes in my first semester was Tap, as in Tap dancing. That knowledge alone, that I needed to buy tap shoes and go to a tap class, had me high and giggly for weeks. And as delightful as I initially found that class to be, in retrospect, that time would have been better spent learning anything at all about Shakespeare, considering the following semester I was to be cast in a UNO production of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night and that I, along with a large portion of the cast, knew absolutely nothing at all about acting Shakespeare. Regardless, in addition to Tap, I had a Modern

Theatre and an general Acting scene study class. I was a graduate assistant so I had various responsibilities in addition to my classes, most of which were centered around the costume shop.

Prior to my matriculation my knowledge of theatre history or the art of theatre was non-existent and my theatre acting experience was very limited. I had been cast in only two plays. The first was an original production written and directed by a dear friend and mentor of mine in the New Orleans theatre community, John Grimsley, which was produced in 2003. I had approximately six lines. The second play I was cast in was a collaborative 2011 production of *Porgy* by the New Orleans D.C. based American Theatre Project, and both Tulane and Dillard Universities. I played Bess. I explained this to Professor Hoover when I applied and auditioned, and I was assured that my limited experience and information would not hinder me in this program. That turned out to not be the case for me.

For *Porgy*, Michael Martin, a friend of the show's director Ed Bishop, invited me to audition for Bess. He had seen me do a staged reading of a play of a local novice playwright. Initially I was skeptical because my sons were five and eight years old and I could not imagine how I would manage the rehearsal schedule, as well as coordinate and pay for the amount of babysitting that would be required.

I am usually very optimistic, and I have a limited amount of foresight, as clearly demonstrated by my assumption about graduate school being child's play. With my usual optimism I coordinated with a babysitter to watch the boys while I auditioned who, as luck would have it, cancelled not even an hour before the audition. I put the boys in my car - both of whom promptly fell asleep - and then drove to the playhouse to formally and in person thank both Ed and Michael for inviting me to audition

and to tell them that because of my situation with my children I would not be able to be a part of the show. Still, the gentlemen insisted I audition so I brought both sleeping boys into the theatre laid them in chairs and tried to do a monologue. Three sentences into my speech they wake up in confusion and desperation, and need their mommy. That was the end of my audition and I was glad I could provide them with a legitimate excuse for not being able to be in the production. I explained I wouldn't be able to juggle the boys, the film conference I produced as well as rehearsals and performances. Ed's response was that everything about me had transformed on stage, my demeanor, my voice, entire persona. He immediately asked my eight-year-old if he could act, and because the boy could, he said yes. Ed then asked if I could sing and I said no. The next words out of his mouth were "Well, I'd like to offer you the role of Bess and your son the role of 12-year-old Scipio." And just like that, I was in my second play because there was no way I could refuse performing with my baby. Ed hired a singer to sing whatever songs I was supposed to sing as "Bess." The setting was the courtyard of a two-story tenement with a shoddy balcony on the second floor. The young woman who was hired to sing the songs that I couldn't sing stayed on the balcony and would break out in song whenever "Bess" had a song to sing. It was very unusual but effective. It was actually quite flattering to think of the trouble of finding and coordinating a soloist the production went through to ensure I was in the show. We rehearsed daily for two months approximately six hours a day. The show went off without a hitch and I had a second play to add to my acting resume. It was not until I began the MFA program at UNO that I learned that the amount of time that was dedicated to that production was highly unusual.

I must add that I believe I have an extraordinary imagination and the ability to concentrate so intensely that I allow myself to fully believe the circumstances of the script and live in the moment when I am acting. At times, I can experience what is referred to as an altered state of consciousness, a term used in the field of the Psychology of Consciousness and used by Eberhard Scheiffele to describe the state of mind many actors report experiencing during acting (Scheiffele 179). I believe it is this ability as an actor that prompted the Head of Dillard University Theatre Department, Ray Vrazel, to note in his letter of recommendation for me when I applied to UNO's MFA program "Shanda has an exceptional acting talent...She is a born actor, and possesses a presence on stage that naturally draws focus." We were both in the cast of *Porgy*, and in regards to my interpretation of "Bess," he says in the same letter, "In my estimation, Shanda was the perfect 'Bess' bringing all of the emotional energy and vulnerable characterization required by such a demanding role."

I developed this particular aptitude at the acting studio in Los Angeles in which I began in earnest my actor's journey. This ability to allow myself to fully believe in the given circumstances stems from my purposeful practice of suspending my disbelief. This concept was initially formulated and consequently coined in 1817 by the English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his autobiography *Biographia Literaria* in which he recounts a conversation with fellow poet William Wordsworth:

...it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination

that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr.

Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us... (Britannica.com)

Conventionally, the phrase “willing suspension of disbelief” is used in reference to theatre and film audience members who believe two incongruent things simultaneously, according to ScientificAmerican.com. “We accept that we are sitting and reading or watching a movie. We also believe or, more accurately, feel that what we are reading or viewing is happening.” As an actor, I apply this technique when I am acting. It allows me to have the same type of immediate and visceral responses that one has when one is in an audience watching an emotionally wrought scene, whether on stage, television or film. It is this ability which has led people to describe my acting as mesmerizing, fascinating, or riveting. For me it is just make believe and I do it with the same lack of inhibitions I had when I was seven years old and used to spin around and around waiting to turn into Wonder Woman. It is the suspension of disbelief that makes acting so incredibly gratifying for me. Without being able to suspend my disbelief, acting is perfunctory and joyless.

Throughout my three years in the MFA program, I was generally incapable of experiencing the euphoria of acting, be it in acting class or in a stage production. I had enrolled in the program with the belief that I would learn how to parlay my film acting training into theatre acting skills. The two

aforementioned theatre acting experiences, the first being the six lines in a friend's original piece and the second being "Bess" in *Porgy*, were all that I brought with me to the MFA Theatre program (with a concentration in acting) and they were highly insufficient for what was required of me. I have also discovered that this has been the case, both currently and in the past, of quite a few African-American students in the MFA theatre program.

As I stated, my training was in film. I learned acting for the camera in the early 2000s from one of the most respected and noteworthy acting coaches in Los Angeles, Aaron Speiser. I studied with Aaron over the course of seven years. Before the end of my first month at the studio, he offered me a scholarship and from then on I attended three to five, five-hour classes a week for free. I presented work in the Improvisation classes and my level of scene study class, whether it was Technique, Introduction to Scene Study, Advanced Scene Study or the Master Scene Study class. However, I audited all of the other level classes. This added up to 15 -25 hours of acting class every week. In addition, there were exercises assigned that I practiced for hours more at home. My training was daily and intense. I trained with the same intensity as any other practitioner of a physical and mental activity such as tennis, golf or any other sport at the professional level. I was dedicated and adventurous, so I stretched myself artistically in every way I could. However, no matter the amount of time I dedicated to studying acting in front of the camera, it could not prepare me for acting at the graduate school level in a theatre program. From my experience, a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre is necessary when pursuing an MFA, however, an MFA program that offers an introductory class to Theatre acting, history and technical production for students without a BFA would alleviate many of the challenges I faced. In

addition, this particular MFA program does not assure MFA actors of roles each year, let alone each semester. It has a policy of open casting calls.

Of particular note, in the Theatre Department's Graduate Handbook it is clearly stated that the "thesis role/production...will be determined by the major professor in consultation with the PRC [Production Resource Committee]." At the time that this decision was to be made, prior to the start of the year, Professor Hoover was my Major Professor. Throughout my time at UNO, I faced challenges communicating with Professor Hoover, as well as felt a lack of support from him. Professor Gow was the director for *Keely and Du* and it was she who asked me to bow out of the show. Fortunately for me, during the same conversation, she also offered to become my major professor and assist me in finding a thesis new project to replace my role as "Walter." Shortly after, it was decided within the department that Professor Gow would be my major professor. As such, she has given me the support and guidance I did not receive from Professor Hoover.

I completely understood that acting in theatre was a different animal than acting in front of a camera, however, I made two inaccurate assumptions that caused my transition into theatre acting to be an extraordinarily challenging one. The first assumption was that I would start with smaller roles and work my way up to larger parts because of my lack of experience. With the departmental policy of open casting, there was no way to ascertain what role you would be cast in. The second assumption was that I would be allowed the amount of time that I needed to incorporate the type of in-depth character analysis and development that I learned in my training in Los Angeles. What I failed to account for was the rather frenzied pace of university productions which enables the actor to work their acting muscles



frequently in ways that I had never used my acting muscles. I mistakenly assumed that the detailed character development work that was the foundation to my acting process was inherent in all acting theories.

## RECAP

The previous section detailed these three necessary components that create the framework for my investigation into the concepts and events described in the following sections of this document:

1. An obstacle that my third year MFA project presented to me in the form of “Walter,” a mediocre, white male with a sincere, cultural belief in his innate superiority and authority inherent in his whiteness, as well as the development and description of this cultural belief that supports this particular ideology of the white, mediocre male.
2. The decision I made in accepting “Walter” as my third year thesis project and a description of suggestions given which were meant to assist me in developing the character of “Walter.”
3. The aptitude, training, and experiences, and lack thereof, I brought or did not bring with me to carry me through my three-year quest for my Masters in Fine Arts in Theater.

In the second half of this, I apply my knowledge of sociology, psychology and anthropology to dissecting and analyzing the multitude of challenges I faced in leading up to the creation of a role that seemed relatively straightforward to both Professor Hoover and Professor Gow. In the case of Professor Hoover I believed he was unable to grasp concepts that challenged his beliefs regarding the white male trope as the baseline for all others experiences. In the case of Professor Gow, who actively sought productions that would reflect the experiences and backgrounds of the MFA theatre students, her

perception is not as tunneled as Professor Hoover's. She recognized her lack of knowledge in this area and has steadily worked at developing an understanding.

### **THIRD YEAR**

The summer before my third year was a difficult one. My mother had been ill for a very long time and passed early on a Sunday morning in mid-August. The fall semester began the next day. I was scheduled to teach my Intro to Acting class at 9:00 AM that Monday morning. Unequivocally, there was nothing I had ever looked forward to doing more than I wanted to play Zip-Zap-Zop with a group of 16 enthusiastic students beginning their journey of self-discovery through acting with me. The department suggested I take time off and deal with my family issues, but I desperately needed to be with the kids. At that moment teaching gave me a sense of life and purpose that I craved after battling sickness and impending death for months.

As far as my thesis project, my assumption was that I would be assigned a role as they had done with other graduate students in previous years. Alas, that was not the case. When I looked into the projects that were being produced that year, there was nothing appropriate for me, as I have previously stated. Apparently, at some point it was discussed that I work on one of the film or television projects shooting in the city, but this information was not relayed to me. Consequently, I began the semester unsure of what was ahead. While I pursued this MFA, I had my talent agency deactivate me, which means that they would stop sending me on auditions for the entire three years of the program. My intent was to remove myself from the film and television audition circuit and focus on my education.

This meant that I no longer had to physically maintain myself at the same level I needed to when I was working in television and auditioning regularly. I saw this as an excellent opportunity to begin my natural hair journey, something I had been contemplating doing for years, and indulging in Cap'n Crunch, donuts and chocolate chip cookies every day. I gained 15 pounds and could not fit into

any of my clothes because, while on this steady diet of junk, I could find no logical or illogical reason to work out. At some point, I learned how to take care of and maintain my natural Afro textured hair.

A natural hair journey begins when one transitions from relaxed to natural hair, and is not for the faint of heart. However, without a doubt, it has been the most valuable action of self-love I have ever taken in that I have grown into my unapologetic, authentic self. I believe as an actor it is imperative to confront all falsehoods you may hold, particularly the falsehoods you hold regarding yourself. However, there are false ideas you may hold that you are unable to discern for a variety of reasons. My natural hair journey has revealed those to me which has in turn made me a more grounded and truthful actor.

My first relaxer was when I was 12 years old. As I mentioned previously, I was 47 years old when I began the MFA program. At that point in my life I had relaxed my hair with a chemical that would frequently burn sores into my scalp every five weeks for 35 years. I had no idea what my own natural hair looked like let alone how to take care of it or style it, and I was terrified. I point this out to highlight the breadth of what I now can accurately describe as my contribution to my own oppression and the mindset with which I began this MFA program. Most notable about this revelation of my participation in my own oppression is that it has just come to me over the last 30 days and has clarified with laser-like accuracy why I was unable to find that “Walter” in me. Before my research into the challenges I encountered trying to create “Walter,” I would have called the act of relaxing my hair simply “fitting in.” However, “Walter” presented an invaluable opportunity for growth, not simply as an actor but it afforded me the fortuity to discover facets of myself and elements of the society in which

I live that I would have not discovered without this perfect confluence of events. I must add that the political climate under the Trump administration and his “Make America Great Again” white supremacists base was another factor that forced me to see myself and the world in which I live in stark relief.

The play *Keely and Du* assisted me in these revelations. The given circumstances at the beginning of the play is that “Keely” is a pregnant, white woman in her 20s who had been seeking an abortion at a clinic. She has been kidnapped by a middle-aged, white, Evangelical, male minister and his 70-something, white, female, born-again Christian, accomplice. At the opening of the play, Keely has just been drugged and kidnapped, and is still unconscious. It is in this state that they bring her into the cold, dank basement and chain her to a bed. The purpose for keeping her imprisoned is to force her to maintain her pregnancy until she is seven months pregnant, the point where termination is no longer possible.

There were a plethora of reasons I was not interested in this play. The main reason being that I find it pontifical and condescending in a manner reminiscent of a fire and brimstone Sunday morning polyester preacher. In addition, a month into MFA the program I had this conversation with Professor Hoover, who at that time was the Chair of the Theatre Department:

Me: I am not interested in doing Black power plays.

Him: Oh, thank god!

Me: But I am also not interested in playing “Becky.”

Him: Well, just play it like a regular person.

In light of this conversation, it can be logically and correctly inferred that I did not want to play a cranky, elderly “Becky” in the embodiment of “Du,” either.

To expound upon this conversation regarding types of plays and roles I would like to discover while in graduate school, I recognized at that moment that over the next three years I was going to struggle in ways that I had not anticipated. My assumption had been that when I was admitted to the program, I was an African-American and that the Chair of the department was fully aware that I was African-American. Surely, it was understood that I would be more interested in stories about people like me and characters with whom I can connect than in stories about people and characters that are unlike me and do not fuel my imagination. If the situation was in reverse and I was a white woman at a historically black college or university and forced to play only African-American female characters, most people who would catch wind of her particular set of circumstances would feel extraordinary discomfort for her and everyone who would have to participate in that charade. But when these types of out of sync situations occur to people of color and we point it out or dare to complain, we are labeled difficult at best. The idiom “Suck it up, buttercup,” comes immediately to mind. It is how we have to exist in order to survive in a system where our discomfort is discounted.

My statement to then-Chair Professor Hoover about not wanting to do Black power plays was not because I found them irrelevant, which I believe he inferred. In fact, I was initiated into theatre by two New Orleans-based theatre companies that addressed the historical issues of oppression of the African-American community, had a majority of African-American actors, performed predominantly for communities of people of color, and embraced me with loving arms. My statement was not a denial

of my cultural history. It was simply an expression of an anxious student chomping at the bit, wanting to live in the now and to look to the future.

Twenty-five years prior to graduate school, I'd worked for one of this country's most honored African-American theatre practitioners, John O'Neal, who introduced me to important parts of my history as an African-American of which I was unaware. My first theatre job was with a shared position with Junebug Productions and Dog and Pony Productions, both New Orleans-based theatre companies. The two companies applied for and received a joint grant that would cover my salary, and then offered me the position. Junebug claimed me three days a week and Dog and Pony had me the other two.

Junebug Productions is a distinguished and well-respected theatre company that was the successor of the Free Southern Theatre, a noble and historic theatre company formed to stage "plays that reflect the struggles of the Negro...before Negro, and in time, integrated audiences." (FST.com) John O'Neal was one of the original, four co-founders of the Free Southern Theatre as well as the founder and artistic director of Junebug. The title of this document honors him in that, no matter what was happening in his life or in the world, whenever he was asked "How ya doin'?" as is customary in this region, his answer was always "Fair to Middlin'." The irony of his reply is significant. John never had a single moment in his life be fair to middlin'. He was an extraordinary, compassionate and intelligent man who believed in me in ways that I had not yet learned to believe in myself. Dog and Pony Productions was founded by John Grimsley and Kenneth Raphael and was just as integral as Junebug in my development as a theatre practitioner. As I previously mentioned, John



Grimsley cast me in my first theatre production. It was an original piece that he had written in a playwriting workshop entitled *Looziana Roulette*. I played a \$10 Airline highway, skank of a whore. I had six lines and I loved every minute of it. Both companies addressed social and environmental injustices perpetrated upon vulnerable communities, which as a sociology major and a lover of art, fueled my passions for and understanding of people and society, and how art can transform both. Because I worked in theatre with a respected civil rights icon who focused on the systemic oppression of African-Americans, and I associated myself with no other race or culture than African-Americans, I felt as if I had lived a life of the average, middle to upper middle class, African-American woman. This was my belief at the start of my graduate school experience and before my natural hair journey was apparent. Once it was obvious that I had no idea how to care for natural, unrelaxed black hair, my life changed overnight, and I realized I had never reconciled anything about being an African-American because I had not truly experienced life as a typical African-American. Who knew?

My facial features can be called Eurocentric. My lips are very thin, unfortunately so. My nose is thinner than most African-Americans, but I wouldn't call it the nose of a Caucasian woman. My eyes I like. When I smile they are shaped like moons. I've tried practicing smiling without having it affect my eyes so as to limit the amount of wrinkles but I am unable to disconnect the movement of my smiling mouth from my eyes. I have been labeled exotic in the United States and when I travel abroad, if it's a country of brown or black people, inevitably someone will speak to me in the official language of that country. In the United States, because of my relaxed hair more than my facial features, I blended in, I

assimilated. I wanted to be acceptable, mainly to white people, although I would have not been able to articulate that at any point.

The reason for my inability to recognize my desire to be acceptable to mainstream culture in the United States is because every young African-American girl I knew who did not have naturally straight or fine hair, lived for the day we were old enough to get a relaxer. It was a rite of passage for a young black girl because it coincided with your period, the beginning of your womanhood. The wisdom of the day surrounding a young girl's first relaxer was that if she is old enough to handle feminine hygiene she should be mature enough to care for and maintain her relaxed hair. The reasoning behind this particular pragmatism is because relaxed hair is in a weakened state and must be handled with utmost care. There is a trust that is bestowed upon you when your mother believes that you are finally mature enough to take care of your own hair, after spending the first 10-12 years nestled between her knees while she combed your hair, and that you will do so as patiently, diligently and lovingly as she once did.

Getting your first relaxer is a cause for celebration that signifies that you are becoming a young adult. However, I believe there is an unspoken truth that is not discussed, and for many it may not be even recognized: Part of us aspired to whiteness and to be accepted by society (i.e. white people). I wanted my hair to move like a white girl's. I wanted it to blow in the wind. I wanted to be able to shake my head and have my hair flow around my shoulders and caress my back like every white girl I saw wherever I looked. I wanted white girl hair, long, shakable, blowing-in-the-wind hair. I do not believe I actually wanted to be white or aspired to whiteness. I had a sneaky suspicion white people did not season their foods sufficiently, if at all, had an aversion to bathing daily and thoroughly, had problems

with coordination, rhythm or both because their dancing and clapping seemed odd, and that they smelled like wet dogs, none of which were appealing.

Considering all I wanted was the white girl hair and not the actual burden of being white, with all that I believed it entailed, I never felt white nor did I think I was trying to be white. I knew the funk and R&B of Stevie Wonder, Natalie Cole, Funkadelic, and Ohio Players. I had never heard of The Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Carly Simon, nor Led Zeppelin. I did, however, know Elton John. His song “Benny and the Jets” was a R&B crossover hit so it was played by the one black radio station in New Orleans in the 70s. That one song was the extent of my knowledge of white people’s music. The rest was just noise to me.

I brought to my thesis project a half a century of experiences, thoughts and feelings of an African-American woman. I was somehow supposed to cull understanding and empathy from a very white play about righteous, white people who kidnap and handcuff a young white woman to a bed. This is an extraordinarily difficult story to which most African-Americans would have trouble relating. This is most definitely white people’s territory, particularly white men. Below is the profile of an abductor given by Brad Garrett, a former FBI behavior profiler:

They tend to be white males, they tend to be a little older, in the 30-40 year age range, they tend to have a history of problems in relationships in general but in particular with women, they may or may not have a criminal history.

It's quite possible they have some sort of history of sexual assault, maybe not for abduction, but maybe being sexually inappropriate with women in the past. But not always.

They tend to be somewhat — but not all of the time — socially isolated. But I can think of situations where that's not the case.

In general, they feel inadequate and one of the things in abducting, controlling and...assaulting is: it's about power. They are in charge, they are doing what they want to do, not what someone else wants them to do. They get what they want.

It's a totally selfish, narcissistic behaviour. (cbc.ca)

If I was to describe the profile of an abductor to another person of color I would speak in the African-American Vernacular English, “Dats some white people shit.” People of color, once again African-Americans in particular, as demonstrated by the statements above made by former FBI criminal profiler Brad Garrett, typically do not do these types of things. According to the data, it can be inferred that we do not have the agency nor the belief in our moral authority that is inherent in being a white male in this society that would allow us to contemplate kidnapping and imprisoning another person with the sense of entitlement and with the frequency that white people do these things. None of

these roles were appropriate for me and yet the then-Chair determined that this was the production upon which I was to base my thesis.

As the following shows, this confidence in their own moral authority comes from being the dominant culture that has convinced itself that the reason for this dominance is their deserved superiority (Albee 75) rather than acknowledging that the dominance that they have acquired and maintained has been done so by what Iris Marion Young describes as *The Five Faces of Oppression*:

1. Exploitation - that domination occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of some people to benefit others
2. Marginalization - the designation of certain groups of people the system of labor markets cannot or will not employ
3. Powerlessness - describes the lives of people who have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect. Absence of genuine democracy in the U.S. means that most people do not participate in making decisions that regularly affect the conditions of their lives and actions.
4. Cultural imperialism consists in the universalization of one group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. Some groups have exclusive or primary access to what Nancy Fraser calls the means of interpretation and communication in a society. As a result, the dominant cultural products of the society, that is, those most

widely disseminated, express the experience, values, goals, and achievements of the groups that produce them. The dominant group saves its position by redefining its superiority of the oppressed group by reconstructed as deviance and inferiority. The dominant groups and their cultural expressions are the normal, the universal, and thereby unremarkable. Since the dominant group's cultural expressions are the only expressions that receive wide dissemination, the dominant groups construct the differences which some groups exhibit as lack and negation in relation to the norms, and those groups become marked out as Other. Victims of cultural imperialism experience a paradoxical oppression, in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and rendered invisible. This creates for the culturally oppressed the experience that W. E. B. DuBois called "double consciousness." "This sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." This consciousness is double because the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped visions of herself or himself. The subject desires recognition as human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, but receives from the dominant culture only the judgment that he or she is different, marked, or inferior.

5. Violence - The members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person.

Not surprisingly, the normalization of the superiority of the dominant culture has been cemented in both fiction and non-fiction literature to reinforce said dominance. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the abstract of a 1996 article in the Journal of Primary Prevention entitled, “The psychological origins of the white male patriarchy,” written by one of the pioneers of clinical social psychology, Dr. George W. Albee:

A white male patriarchy developed in England as the British empire grew, expanding its colonial exploitation around the world. A rational explanation was required to explain how a small number of men deserved to control this enormous and growing wealth.

With Darwin's theory of evolution (survival of the fittest), Galton's studies of genius (rich and successful men were related to each other) and Spencer's insight that natural selection in human societies was Nature's way of getting rid of bad stock and preserving the best, the theory took shape. The theory was imported to America where it flourishes.

Psychologists [have] provided evidence to support the ideas of the ruling class:

intelligence, mental disorders, crime and the addictions are all due to bad genes and bad brains. The defect model occupies the center of the stage. [In this model, there] is no need to act to remove injustice, sexism, racism, homophobia-the causes of distress are not social, they are internal, personal defects. Drugs will reduce the symptoms while the search goes on for the internal defects. (Journal of Primary Prevention)

According to white male patriarchal ideology, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Jewish people, women, members of the LGBTQIA community, disabled persons, those of Arabic descent, those of Indigenous populations throughout the world, essentially anyone who is not a white, straight male is considered defective. Although there are many clear cataclysmic repercussions that can be listed as a result of this belief, one cruel consequence of this false narrative is that medical experiments have been, and as of this writing continue to be, conducted on marginalized groups because of their perceived lack of worth. In point of fact, it was announced three weeks ago that Louisiana is set to test a pilot program using a surgical implant on prisoners which will attempt to treat individuals addicted to opioids. It must be noted that this implant has not been approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration.

(The Advocate May 6)

It is under this paradigm that I, an African-American female attempted to create the role of “Walter,” a character written as a white, misogynistic, Evangelical, male minister who had the confidence that only a mediocre white male can possess solely because of his unwavering belief that he is the exemplar of all of mankind. Furthermore, according to Paulo Freire in his tome, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it is precisely because I am a member of at minimum two groups that are oppressed by men such as “Walter,” that I, as an individual who believes the duty of an actor is to honor the truth, am utterly unable to perceive him accurately. I am only able to see him through the lens of oppression.

(Freire 48)

This explanation also illuminates the difficulty I had in various scene study classes, particularly the Acting Styles class, in which the focus was on what I can only describe as white people from back



in the day, and a Shakespeare scene class, which I would describe as more white people from back in the day. In order to fully understand this, imagine being transported to the Amazon and being told you must mimic, aspire to be, as well as honor the Amazonian way of life without regard to who you are and the experiences people like you have had. Under this paradigm you are to disparage all that represents who you are. This is the double consciousness W.E.B. DuBois describes.

One incident in the Acting Styles class demonstrates the double consciousness with laser precision. In the fall of 2017, I was cast in a university production of *The Royal* written by playwright Marco Ramirez. It was inspired by the true story of the first Negro Heavyweight Champion of the World, Jack Johnson. I played his sister Nina, a character directly from the imagination of Ramirez. This was apparently the first majority black cast in a production at the University of New Orleans. A faculty member relayed this information to me and I have been unable to find anything to the contrary.

*The Royale* is a remarkably powerful story and I am a better person as well as actor because of its strength. It is set in the early 1900s when Jim Crow was still the rule of the land and black people were relegated to second class citizens having no rights nor opinions that could make impact on policy affecting them. At the time, there was an “American” Boxing Champion of the World and a Negro Boxing Champion of the World. White boxers could not fight black boxers. As “Nina,” my brother “Jay ‘the Sport’ Jackson” is the negro boxing champion and he has challenged the American boxing champion. The challenge was accepted and as a result, my family began receiving threats. I travel by train - in the Negro car, although this is not mentioned in the script - to the town that hosts the championship. I arrive the evening of the fight. My intention is to convince “Jay” to not go on with the

fight. My fear is ultimately for the safety of my two, young boys, but I am also aware of the repercussions of a black man winning the ultimate boxing championship of the world, a world in which a black man in comparison to a white man, is considered a defective human being.

I was in the middle of my natural hair journey at the time. My intention was to transition for two years but after a year of transitioning I had a temper tantrum. My hair with its two textures - damaged, relaxed hair and kinky new growth - insisted on matting up together and would not act according to my standards. In utter frustration, I grabbed a pair of scissors and conducted what is termed in the natural hair community, the “Big Chop.” I immediately felt nauseous and drained so I went to bed instead of to a party for which I had been trying to get ready. This was at the beginning of my second year of graduate school. I now had a TWA - a “teeny, weeny ‘fro.” I no longer had the long, mid-back, straight hair that had been the buffer between my existence as a fully-recognized African-American woman and the oppression of white society. Immediately, overnight, my life changed. Now, in my interactions with white people, I was treated indifferently at best, and downright rudely and disrespectfully in some of the worse cases. It changed the way I perceived the world.

As “Nina,” an African-American woman at the turn of the 20th century, the fear I had for my children, for my brother, for myself and for every other black person in the United States of America at that time was immeasurable. As an actor transitioning from my relaxed hair to my natural hair, my interactions with white people intensified Nina’s fear. As a human being in this society, my transition, my hair, my crown and glory, forced me to pay extraordinarily close attention to the interactions of the

oppressors with those they oppress in this society, in particular African-American women, but in general African-Americans and women are separate entities.

To complicate matters even further, the director of this UNO production of *The Royale* was at the time my fellow graduate assistant, Ryan Decker, the epitome of mediocre white male. By this I mean that on just a single page in his MFA thesis, Ryan mentioned “master” or “mastering” in referring to himself while there were multiple incidences where Ryan was described to me by his superiors as “not very good,” and “average.” One of his professors failed to remember who Ryan was although the class had less than eight students.

As the director of *The Royale*, he was responsible for every aspect of the production. In this position he failed to communicate and coordinate with the proper individuals at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, to which we were honored to be invited. His ineptitude resulted in the set being 8 - 10’ feet further upstage than it was intended to be. This resulted in a lighting plot which caused the lights to illuminate all of the actors on stage from their feet up to their shoulders. No one’s face was lit for the initial 11:00 am performance. For the 7:00 pm performance, the lighting design was abandoned and the stage was given a general wash of light. I consider this final product subpar. It was an extraordinarily dangerous experience for an actor because, and all five castmates agreed, we were afraid not knowing what was happening nor what to expect.

Ironically, Ryan hailed from Dubuque, Iowa, a town I would describe as mediocre and nondescript, with a less than 3% African-American population. This would account for his limited experience with African-American women which would explain his insistence that I play Nina as the

typical film, television and theatre “strong black woman” trope. Where I would see “Nina” begging with her “Please!”, Ryan would see “Nina” demanding. This also explained his perseverance in correcting my African-American Vernacular English accent with which I endowed Nina. It was Nina’s pain and humiliation with which I identified intensely, particularly in one scene where, as a tactic to convince her that fighting this fight would right the wrongs of the world, “Jay” describes a flashback scene from his childhood where he as a young boy comes home and discovers Nina, a teenager craving acceptance in society, laying on the floor, skin peeling and bleeding from a hot comb that she was using to straighten her hair. In her attempt to be accepted, to be celebrated, to fit in, she tried to straighten her hair like the white women she was surrounded by and admired so. I deeply connected with Nina’s lack of self-worth and her humiliation at being discovered in an act of self-hate.

The director, Ryan Decker from Iowa, was unable to appreciate any of this. Despite my trying to engage in open conversations with him, he failed to understand my connection with Nina, he had no reference point to be able to judge the accent I gave Nina, and he refused to acknowledge that a woman who is capable of confronting and addressing a sensitive subject matter head on is also capable of being hurt and humiliated. “Why are you crying? Where is her pride?” he asked me. The implication being that a strong, proud, black woman would not allow anyone to see her vulnerability. The most significant part of this statement to me is that for Ryan and others like him, this would not apply to white women as there is no strong, proud, white woman trope. In fact, I had to show him articles regarding this trope he was insisting upon before he even acknowledged its existence.

To clarify, excluding the final performance at the festival, I was not crying. I was trying *not* to cry. However, out of fear and pain, I did cry that final performance at the KCACT Festival. In addition, to provide further insight into Ryan's seemingly absolute lack of expertise on African American culture, specifically African American Vernacular English, below is an exchange we had regarding "Nina's" pronunciation of the word "doctor":

Ryan: You're dropping the "r" at the end of "doctor"

Me: Yes.

Ryan: Well, it sounds British,

Me: Yes it does.

Ryan: Bur that's not how you say it.

Me: Yes we do.

The most fascinating part of this exchange is that my father is doctor. He was the first black dermatologist in the state of Louisiana. Every black teenager that hit puberty and had acne went to my father because of melanin, black skin scars radically different than white skin. Black dermatology requires knowledge about keloids, and the connection between this condition, melanin, collagen, surgical procedures and scaring. A point of reference for the layman would be African scarification. My father developed a surgical procedure, currently in practice, which reduces the likelihood of keloids. I have heard the word doctor pronounced by African Americans my entire life. I know we drop the "r."

To continue, it was his idea of "Nina" as the trope of a strong, black woman that has been used to discount the humanity of African-American women. This perception of black women has deadly

consequences. African-American women have the highest maternal death rate from complications of pregnancy. (Harvard Public Health) In addition, a nursing textbook was pulled in 2017 because it categorized people's perceptions of pain by race, clearly stating that "Blacks often report a higher intensity of pain than other cultures." (Boston Globe) Our pain is ignored or discounted.

The following example demonstrates how this white perception of black people affected me as an African-American woman in the MFA program. In the Acting Styles class, which was held concurrently as the production of *The Royale* in the fall of 2017, my scene partner picked a scene from Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. I played the role of "Yelena" and my scene partner played the role of "Sophia." Professor Hoover taught that class as well as the other two acting classes for graduate students in the program. Along with all the other old plays about white people, *Uncle Vanya* did not resonate with me. I did the scene and my feedback from Professor Hoover was "I hate her." My response was, "Good, because I hate her too." For me, "Yelena" represented the embodiment of the oppressive society I was beginning to fully experience. At that moment, I was overwhelmed with an avalanche of emotions. Playing the oppressed in "Nina" and the oppressor in "Yelena" was extremely unsettling, and I was searching for a way to communicate and resolve how I was feeling. I stated, "I feel like I am playing the slave and the slave owner." That didn't land so I tried another analogy: "I feel like I'm playing the raped and the rapist." The significance of both statements was either ignored or lost on my professor who promptly suggested I figure out how to reconcile this dilemma because actors who do summer stock have to be able to switch back and forth between characters, sometimes on the same day.

Another incident underscoring the destructive atmosphere in which I was supposed to learn about the art of theatre as well as further hone my craft happened in the spring of 2018. As I stated, our production of *The Royale* was invited to perform at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in regional competition in San Angelo, Texas. Because I was the graduate assistant working in the costume shop, unpacking and preparing the costumes for the performances were my responsibilities. The rest of the cast and crew were working setting up the stage and were having difficulties. As I mentioned previously, the stage plot and lighting plot were inaccurate and it was the overly-confident, mediocre, white, male Ryan Decker as the director who was responsible. Our scene shop team of Diane Bass and Kevin Griffin are veteran theatre practitioners with over 40 years of experience between them who are capable of creating impeccably stunning work. The responsibility for the unfolding debacle at this prestigious theatre festival lay at feet of the Ryan Decker the director.

While this is happening on stage, I am in the dressing room unpacking, steaming and hanging costumes. Delilah Lee, the 19-year-old, undergraduate, stage manager of the production, made the executive decision, without actually having executive authority, that I should be with the rest of the cast and crew who were in a panic and desperately trying to reconfigure both set and lights. She came looking for me and found me in the dressing room, because that was where I belonged. I had just hung up some of the men's pieces of clothing and was crossing the room to get more items out of the trunk to hang up and steam. My arms were empty. Delilah barks, "What are you just chillin'?" and then storms off. Her assumption was that I was avoiding work. Her implication was that I was a lazy nigger. It is hard for me to imagine this young white woman saying these words to either a middle-aged white man

or woman, and yet that was her first thought when she saw me walking with nothing in my arms. I felt the generational pain and weight of my fore-mothers who had been whipped or beaten to death because a young white girl assumed she was up to no good. Two hours later I had to play Nina. Two hours after the performance, Delilah and I performed a scene together for an acting competition at the festival. We had choreographed a shove wherein she shoves me gently and I endow the motion with force. I am assuming because she was upset with me, either she forgot to fake the shove or she meant to really push hard and did. She was aware, as it was common knowledge in the department, that I have ruptured a disc in my lower back and struggle with pain. This is one of the reasons I do not do any lifting, which working on the stage would require. Whatever the case may be, whether she shoved me harder on purpose or by accident, I had no recourse anyway. I simply took a couple of Motrin and waited for the pain to subside as I had another performance as Nina three hours after the acting competition.

Three significant factors that became apparent to me:

- 1) I was no longer worthy of the same respect that I once garnered when my hair was relaxed and worn straight,
- 2) I was not given the respect that my age and wisdom should have warranted as a middle-age woman (which I believe would have been non-negotiable for a white middle-age woman), and
- 3) my life experience as a 48-year-old African-American woman was not even valued regarding my ability and insight in crafting an African-American woman on stage in the eyes of a mediocre white male.



All of these experiences, growing up wanting the flowing hair of a white girl, joy and pride of getting my first relaxer, the fear and struggle of transitioning to natural, offering the shame I felt at my own afro-textured hair to communicate Nina's vulnerability, being belittled and having my feelings as well as my experiences discounted, all of this is what I brought with me, most of it fresh and raw, when I had to face the personification of my oppression in "Walter."

Being belittled and discounted made me feel unsafe both emotionally and psychologically as an African-American female actor at UNO. I was unable to find a sense of security and emotional safety that I needed to explore and be vulnerable. This environment intensely stifled my creativity. It greatly inhibited me and caused me to question my artistry, my value and at times my sanity. It was not until a trip to Los Angeles to spend time with my mentor and acting coach Aaron Speiser, that I was able to regain my confidence regarding both my sense of self as well as my craft. I am a well-trained, finely tuned film actor. I was rusty in general when I began the program because I had not acted in six or seven years, but the training never left me. When I studied with Aaron years ago, he continuously pushed me and I worked diligently in order to obtain the psychological insight and physical malleability that I have as an actor. My initial fear going into the program was that I would mar my acting technique with subpar acting instruction. What I should have been more concerned with was maintaining my belief in myself.

## IN SEARCH OF WALTER

Initially I was excited to participate in this non-traditional casting exercise as I have no foresight and had no idea exactly how disastrous this could be. I viewed it as an opportunity to see how it was done and what changes would need to be made in order for it to be successful. I began my character breakdown with questions: Where am I from? Am I gay? Am I transgendered or intersexed? “Walter” mentions his/her wife at some point in the play. Am I a lesbian? I could be a married lesbian minister. What do I sound like? I sound like a Southerner. Evangelicals and Southerners go together like red beans and rice. I started with an Alabama twang. That accent sounds fittingly entitled to me. I played around with an Alabama accent with some of the lines and it didn’t quite fit. For my methodology, I find it useful to initially start with archetypes, watered down into stereotypes and tropes, in order to gauge how a character will be received by an audience. According to the U.S. News and World Report’s yearly assessment of the quality of education, in America, Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi have all competed for last place for decades. With that correlation, to the non-southerner, the accents of people from these three states may sound ignorant and uneducated. “Walter,” however, was not uneducated, and his vocabulary and articulation indicated that. He was able to describe in detail the steps in an abortion procedure as well as effortlessly pronounce the medical terminology used. Alabama didn’t quite bring that type of proficiency nor articulation immediately to my mind considering its poor education system so I ditched the Alabama accent.

I moved the accent further north to Charlotte, North Carolina. The quality of education is higher than Alabama’s. Alabama ranks 50th in the nation whereas North Carolina is in the middle at 25th. (USNewsandWorldReport.com) The Charlotte, North Carolina accent has a strong condescending

quality to my ear. Typical of members of the white, male patriarchy, and in particular southern, white men like “Walter,” they maintain a belief in their superiority which they believe endows them with an innate authority. (Albee) “Walter’s” condescending behavior, indicative of both this superiority and authority, is an essential element throughout the play. As such, I felt the Charlotte, North Carolina accent, which is technically a drawl, felt appropriate.

I attacked memorizing my lines with various techniques. I memorized them by rote through repetition, but I also re-read the script quite a few times and typed up a chart with my lines and the applicable cues. I also recorded my lines on the voice recorder on my phone so that whenever I was in the car or in the grocery store or washing dishes, I could run over lines. By the time rehearsal began I had worked on storing those lines inside my memory for almost four months. It was very mechanical.

I was working on lines before I knew who I as “Walter” was and this was the antithesis of the way I learned to act in film. I had been taught to figure out who you are, in other words your background, your inner life and your motivations, and the lines will come. At some point I needed guidance in attacking my character work because I was having extreme difficulty. Consequently, in one of my acting classes with Professor Hoover prior to rehearsals for *Keely and Du*, I made an attempt to understand alternative processes for creating a character and memorizing the lines. I mentioned that I was taught to create a character from the inside out. Professor Hoover’s response was, “Your teacher was an idiot.” That was the end of that discussion.

I continued to struggle. One of the other challenges that loomed over me throughout the entire process of crafting a truthful “Walter,” was the fact that an African-American woman did not fit the

profile of an abductor. I conducted a significant amount of research and I was unable to find a single instance where an African-American woman without a history of mental illness had kidnapped anyone. There were, however, multiple cases of white men without a mental illness kidnapping people. The mental illness of the African-American women was significant to me. In the society in which we live, it is frequently in the news that police officers kill black people and are acquitted of all wrongdoing simply because that police officer claims he or she was scared. Then on the other side of the spectrum there are cases like Dylan Roof who went into a church, pretended to pray with a group of nine African-American men and women, shot eight of them dead however decided to leave one woman alive so that she could provide testimony of the murders to law enforcement, left the scene of the crime, and was later picked up and subsequently arrested by police, and because he was hungry, they bought him burger, reportedly from Burger King. (CharlotteObserver.com)

In today's environment characterized in the contrasting interactions of black and white people with law enforcement as described above, I was unable to imagine Walter as a mentally competent African-American woman because I would not be honoring the truth. If Walter was presented as an African-American woman, as would be the case with me in the role, the entire storyline changes. It is no longer the story of a pompous, misogynistic white man who thoroughly believed in his superiority and innate authority to make decisions for others. With an African-American female kidnapper, it becomes the story of a deranged black woman who kidnaps a young, pregnant white woman. This was obviously not the author's intent.

As mentioned previously, we began rehearsals on January 17 with me having memorized approximately 75% of my lines by rote as directed by Professor Hoover. I could rattle off the lines like a child rattles of his or her ABCs. Unfortunately, I had to go back to the beginning of every dialogue or speech if I stumbled, very similar to when a person is asked what letter comes before “L,” most need to start reciting from the beginning of the ABCs and work their way to “L” in order to figure out what comes before it. In addition, I still had no firm grasp on “Walter.” I could not answer the simple question of “Who am I?”

Armed with my motto of “Take the path of least resistance. Get the fuck out,” I decided it did not matter who “Walter” was. I had seen actors in the department, not all but enough, get on stage and seemingly not know who they are as well as not understand the words that were coming out of their mouths. In fact, I found this described the majority of actors who were in the third play I was ever cast in, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. This was the first Shakespearean play I had read in over 20 years, and even with overestimating, it was likely my fifth. In the midst of rehearsals for *Twelfth Night* I pointed out to Professor Hoover that many of the undergraduate actors were reciting the lines but that they did not know what they were saying. In *Twelfth Night*, the actors were not connected to their words and it was painfully apparent because they were unable to perform any actions. Their technique was to raise and lower their pitch or their volume, or both simultaneously. At the time, there was no option of even learning how to act Shakespeare properly. It wasn’t until two years later, when Professor Gow came to UNO and developed a Study of Shakespeare class that the theatre department could offer any instruction in understanding Shakespeare.

It was not my intention to point out anyone's inadequacies because, with my limited understanding and experience with Shakespeare, I was inadequate as well. For example, there was a scene I was in with two other actors, one being an undergraduate and the other being my fellow graduate student and future director, Ryan Decker. Ryan's character delivers a speech to me and the undergraduate actor. Out of lack of understanding and sheer frustration I ask the young man, "Is this supposed to be funny?" and he laughs and responds with, "I don't know." Professor Hoover is in front of house so I catch his attention and direct the same question his way. His reply was, "Shanda, if nothing else, just laugh."

*Twelfth Night* was produced in the spring at the end of my first year of graduate school. The repercussions of my ignorance and criticism of Professor Hoover's production was that I, although I had met the requirements after a year of being a teacher's assistant, would not be allowed to teach my own acting class the following fall. He required me to be a teacher's assistant for an additional semester, although I had professional training as well as professional experience. I had more professional training and experience than the other three graduate students who went on to teach the following semester. In referring to this period where I was held back from learning how to teach independently, I openly referred to it as "grad-school time-out."

Seeing how the production of *Twelfth Night* was executed, my assumption was that the muscle that these actors were strengthening was the "Just get up and do it" muscle rather than the "Do this to the best of my ability" muscle. Therefore, it was with this in mind that I soldiered on with "Walter." It was a very low bar I had set for myself and still, I was unsuccessful. The moment I would get on stage,

the lines would fall out of my head. If I sat down I could recite the lines, but I had no connection to the words. I had no “Walter,” and without a fully fleshed out character, I was unable to make any connections with words. Before the first two weeks of rehearsal were up, I was thankfully asked to leave the show and seek other projects that would fulfill the thesis project requirements. Professor Gow directed me towards a few student film projects, two on which I worked, *Esperanza*, by Kendra Jones Morris, in which I played an I.C.E. agent and was shot on Friday, February 1, and *The Ties that Bind Us*, by DeSantos Manning, in which I played a detective and which was shot on Saturday, February 23.

To add to my good fortune, my agent accidentally reactivated me because of a misunderstanding and started sending me on auditions. The first audition was for a surgeon on *NCIS: New Orleans* and I booked it. The audition was five days before I left for a 10-day trip to Los Angeles. I was going to spend time and consult with Aaron Speiser, my acting coach, because I needed a professional perspective on struggles I had with “Walter,” but more importantly, I needed him to remind me of what I was capable of doing as an actor. I had spent close to three years being told whatever I did was either inaccurate or insufficient and my self-esteem and confidence were low. My flight to LA was direct and once we landed, I checked my messages. I had booked the role and needed to return to New Orleans in five days.

I came home, had an appointment with wardrobe and shot the scene within a week. Once it was rough cut edited, I went to the studio do a session of ADR (Automatic Dialogue Replacement), in the form of background conversation that takes place during the scene. I was fully activated with my talent agency at this point and in the following two weeks I had three auditions, all for a television series

entitled *Queen Sugar*. These were “self-tape” auditions wherein an actor has someone record their audition with a reader, usually the camera operator, and then emails the audition to the casting director.

The three *Queen Sugar* roles, a “Family Counselor,” a “TV Producer,” and a “Hotel Desk Clerk,” were contrasting and meant to test my acting abilities in general but also my ability to create believable behavior and memorize a scene within a short time frame. In the first audition I was given a seven day turn around in order to send the self-taped audition to the casting director. In the second audition I had three days. I was given two days for the third audition but the person who assists me in taping only had availability the following morning at 6:00 am. I was able to create a believable character, memorize the scene, tape the audition and then send it to the casting director in less than 15 hours.



## **HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?**

I began researching memorization techniques used in acting when I realized I was having difficulty with “Walter’s” lines. Previously, I had been diagnosed with stress-related memory loss which accounted for the struggles I have had with lines before, but this was entirely different. My stress-related memory loss began with my first pregnancy which was a high-risk which forced me to spend the last two months of my pregnancy in the hospital with dire complications. My son was born a month early and with the exception of a faint heartbeat, he had no signs of life, no noise, no movement, no breathing. From then on, he has had medical issues that require regular doctor’s office visits as well as visits to the Emergency Room. He has migraines which mimic strokes in that his limbs go numb, he loses his sight, and he experiences aphasia which is when the wires in his brain short circuit and he loses the ability to speak English correctly. I have had a significant cause for stress, and it is unsurprising that at times I am unable to remember lines.

This was clearly the case for my first two years of graduate school but not my final year. As I mentioned before, the summer before my third year, my mom passed from a long illness. This was also the summer that we were able to gain more control over my son’s episodes. In addition, our dog died. I point this out, not to sound cold and calloused, but going into my third year, I no longer had the responsibilities of caring for my mother and taking care of the dog, and the number of trips to the emergency room with my son was significantly reduced. With my mother’s passing, I was terribly sad and numb and angry and relieved, in that she was no longer suffering, but I was not stressed.

I could not blame stress on my fight with “Walter.” Being a hypochondriac, a condition which I have found oft times plagues sensitive actors, I feared a brain tumor and made appointment with my

doctor who referred me to a neurologist. However, since then I have worked on a professional television set and also taped three, fully-memorized auditions which required quick turn-around times. These four experiences indicated to me that my inability to memorize “Walter’s” lines meant that I did not have a brain tumor and that it was something else entirely.

I consulted with Aaron regarding non-traditional casting and my inability to understand and embody “Walter,” or simply memorize his lines. It is his theory that when a character’s socio-economic history is crucial to the plot and or the theme of the story, non-traditional casting will change the themes and in essence becomes a “lie.” For example, a civil rights attorney can be male or female, or any race or ethnicity. However, if the attorney is an Evangelical Christian who is morally against same-sex marriages and yet represents the LGBTQIA community, the theme of the story will change from a civil rights advocacy film to one that showcases undermining civil rights. This allows for the possibility that the theme would not be the one the writer had intended and that the message could be different. In this case, the truth would not be honored. This was my dilemma with “Walter.”

To begin to understand my difficulty with “Walter,” I did an excessive amount of research after leaving the *Keely and Du* production in preparation for writing this thesis. I started with memory which led me to learning, which in turn led me to perception. Perception, in turn, led me to an individual’s beliefs which then landed me at societies and communities. My formal education background is in sociology, psychology and philosophy, which required an extensive amount of research which I have always enjoyed. In researching the probable causes for my difficulties with “Walter,” the more I researched, the more I discovered, and then the more I wanted to know. From perception, I began

focusing on western society's influence on behavior. Specifically, I was confounded as to why I was unable to understand, empathize or find even a modicum of value in "Walter."

I researched the effects of colonialism throughout the world. I explored oppression and assimilation, and community (*gemeinschaft*) vs. society (*gesellschaft*). I dissected what comparative mythology scholar Joseph Campbell labeled the Paleolithic moral order, which connected man and nature, as opposed to the individualism of modern man which put man in charge of nature. (Campbell 41) I studied the values of traditional black and brown cultures and societies, and compared them to values of the white male patriarchy which is the dominant culture today.

I wondered what caused humans to turn away from the communal living in which we had thrived for millions of years to developing a labor-based society, in which a person's worth is based upon their ability to produce and contribute to society. Because of my research and the vitriol I uncovered, I began to have serious concerns about living in this current climate of hate in the United States, therefore I attended an emergency response workshop. Current data shows that the rate of white deaths is outnumbering the rate of white births, which I believe is contributing to the fear that the white patriarchy is losing its place of dominance in the world, which in turn is fueling many of the hate crimes happening today. (ProPublica.org)

While at this emergency response workshop, an EMT demonstrated mouth to mouth resuscitation and explained the concept of "Do the Most Good," which is the motto of the Salvation Army, a Christian charity which among other things is an institution that supports the white male patriarchy. (Vox.com) Under the edict of "Do the Most Good," people who are injured must be tagged

and treated according to their ability to survive. (Lumumba) The person who has the most chance of survival will be treated first whereas the person with the least chance of survival will be covered up and left to die. “Do the Most Good,” translates into save the most lives.

This workshop took place in an African-American neighborhood center in which all participants were African-American. This declaration stunned us all and because of the research I had been doing in order to try to understand “Walter” as well as my inability to connect with “Walter,” I had an epiphany. White culture and society is in complete opposition to black and brown culture throughout the world. I could see that these black men and women were unable to accept this as the rule of thumb when calculating who should live and who should die. This struggle was in large part because, as African-Americans, our culture is still very much a traditional culture (Utah.edu). In a traditional culture, a person is inherently worthy simply by virtue of being a person. In modern society, productivity is the measure of a person’s worth. The more productive people a society has, the stronger its workforce, which in turn creates a strong economy, the very basis of a modern capitalist society. (Forbes.com) All black and brown cultures, be it Asian or African, Indigenous Americans, or indigenous Australians continue to revere our traditional values in spite of the conflict they present with Western white culture. (HuffingtonPost.com)

As previously stated, in order to achieve and maintain its dominance, the white male patriarchy has oppressed black and brown people through what Iris Young calls the Five Faces of Oppression: Exploitation, Marginalization, Powerlessness, Cultural Imperialism and Violence. (Young) As an African-American, female member of our white, male, patriarchal society, I am only able to view

“Walter” through the lens of oppression. (Freire) In addition, I had been previously unaware that relaxing my hair to fit in and be accepted by my oppressor, was an act of contributing to my own oppression. Freire says that as long as “to be” means “to be like,” and “to be like,” means “to be like your oppressor,” a person is not his or her authentic self. (Freire) It is similar to what W.E.B. DuBois described as a “double consciousness,”

(T)he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois 3)

This was unquestionably the most valuable lesson I have learned in graduate school. As a person whose integrity as an actor is inextricably linked to truth, the discovery of my authentic self is priceless. With further introspection and analysis, it made complete sense to me that my mind and body worked in tandem to reject everything about “Walter.”

Additionally, through the process of uncovering the mystery behind my inability to become “Walter,” I solved other riddles of my graduate school theatre experience that relate to white male superiority and oppression, however the two most important are:

1. My dislike of the Practical Aesthetics system of acting, of which UNO theatre department is a proponent and which I consider the antithesis of the type of acting I revere and,
2. My intense aversion to Shakespeare, which is a symbol of cultural imperialism and a weapon of oppression throughout the world. (TheGuardian.com)

Delving further down the rabbit hole than I had ever intended for this thesis, I believe I began to uncover the reasons I had such difficulty in portraying “Walter.” According to the research I’ve read, as the oppressed with values that are rejected by my oppressor, I cannot empathize with someone who would consider me, my experiences or my beliefs worthless, ignorant or primitive. This realization and ability to admit that I am oppressed just came to me over the past few weeks. I am an educated, well-traveled, African-American woman who has led a life of privilege therefore I never felt oppressed. I’ve gone white water rafting in Maine; I’ve sunbathed topless in St. Tropez; I’ve been sailing and scuba diving in the Caribbean; I’ve flown planes (with licensed pilots of course); I’ve lived in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Miami in addition to other major cities in the United States; along with a plethora of other elitist activities and experiences of which most average, mediocre, white men can only dream.

And yet these types of men have condescended to me, called me racist names, and treated me disrespectfully, although I had never considered any of that oppression nor oppressive. I considered them mean and nasty, and I would consider myself angered, although in my head I used much more colorful words. At the crux of everything regarding being an African American woman, I still conducted my life in accordance to my desires. When I wanted something, I would create a plan of action, execute that plan and obtain my goals. I never doubted my abilities nor intellect. Most importantly, I never considered that relaxing my hair contributed to the ease of which I could accomplish the things I have accomplished. I assimilated easily and was rewarded by society, meaning white people, for doing so. However, it is now apparent that I no longer am trying to fit in. By embracing my natural hair I seemed to offend two types of people: 1) white people with implicit biases against people of color and 2) people of color who have what I have begun to call a “colonized mind,” meaning that they agree and accept the negative biases and opinions about themselves of others *not* like themselves.

Until my experiences through my natural hair journey and my experiences at the University of New Orleans, I was unaware of my rejection of self that is inherent in surviving in a space where you are not a member of the dominant culture. This became more apparent with my numerous interactions with mediocre white men during my time in graduate school. My voice, my experiences, my opinions, my suggestions, as well as my offers of assistance were repeatedly ignored and belittled. My style of acting was in conflict with the type of acting of many of the actors in the program. My Los Angeles acting coach, who can claim quite a few actors who have been nominated for Oscars for roles on which

he coached them, expects his students to use a quote from Uta Hagen, as their guiding principle for performance, “If I can see the acting, it’s bad acting.” (YouTube.com) That was the bar set for me.

Unfortunately at UNO, I *saw* the acting and there was no intent nor course of action to correct that.

I read the text that the UNO Film and Theatre Department uses as its guiding philosophy, *The Practical Handbook for the Actor* the summer before I began the MFA program because I wanted to be prepared.

The book seemed rather convoluted and superficial to me. I could not imagine anyone crafting a moving performance with those guidelines which seemed to encourage the actor to create roles with the depth of a paper doll.

My research for “Walter” led to my analyzing my experiences with Professor Hoover, Ryan Decker and Delilah Lee. The results of that analysis led me to theories on oppression, dominant cultures, and the means of oppression and domination. This in turn led me to the effects of colonialism, cultural norms and value systems. Through research, I refreshed my memory of the sociological concepts of *Gemeinschafts* (community) and *Gesellschafts* (society). I looked at the societal values of *Gesellschafts* and compared them to the community values of *Gesellschafts* as well as the types of humans these systems created. I concluded that, although I am an American, my values which guide me are Traditional African values. These African values are very similar to the values throughout the black and brown people of the world and in direct conflict with the values of white people, such as:

- Human nature is neither good nor evil, but capable of error.
- Humans should adapt to nature and the universe, rather than seek to alter it;
- Property is to be shared;



- The idea that the solutions to human problems are to be sought in traditional legends and stories, and
- That the universe is understood as a unity, not a dualism of mind/body or matter/spirit (Utah.edu)

These concepts are inherent in African, Native American, Asian, and Aboriginal traditions and beliefs.

When I compare these cultural systems of belief to Stoicism, from which Christianity draws much of its ideology, the philosophy seems to be cold-hearted and out of sync with traditional cultures throughout the world. The following excerpt from the Washington Post article entitled, “Guess who’s championing Homer? Radical online conservatives,” describes this philosophy rather succinctly:

The Stoics aspired to live rationally, which meant accepting that each person could exert complete control over their own behavior. Emotions, they thought, were usually a result of irrationally believing that somebody else’s actions, or other outside forces, determined one’s psychological reaction. The Stoic thinker Epictetus wrote in his “Discourses” that the appropriate response to the death of your child is to say to yourself, “I knew I had fathered a mortal.” (WashingtonPost.com)

On the other side of the cultural spectrum was the correlation Western Europeans made between “primitive” peoples and emotionalism, the opposite of self-control of stoicism:

Positing emotionalism as the basis of primitive life was one way of denigrating ‘primitive culture’ over the ‘advanced culture’ of white Western Europeans, because self-control and inhibition were seen as the crux of civilization. It was also an apology

for imperialism and the taking of lands of 'primitive' peoples, who were said to be backward, lacking in concepts of private property, and unable to bring about the advances that would be beneficial to their society. Unjust and discriminatory treatment of native peoples was thus justified on the basis of their biological and cultural 'weaknesses.' Emotionalism as a way of describing black religion was one part of this discussion of primitive dark-skinned peoples and their role in the advance of civilized society. (Evans 93)

When looking at the text the department uses as its preferred acting theory, I began to understand why I am unmoved by the performances. *The Practical Handbook for the Actor* is based upon the philosophy of stoicism (Bruder xi), which is the antithesis of the emotional availability encouraged by my own culture as well as the Stanislavski-based acting technique that Aaron taught. According to Stanislavski:

There can be no true art without living. It begins where feeling comes into its own. To reproduce feelings you must be able to identify them out of your own experience. But as mechanical actors do not experience feelings they cannot reproduce their external results. (Stanislavski 25)

He continues:

When you first begin to study each role you should gather all the materials that have any bearing on it, and supplement them with more and more imagination until you have

achieved such a similarity to life that it is easy to believe in what you are doing. In the beginning forget about your feelings. When the conditions are prepared and right, feelings will come to the surface of their own accord. (Stanislavski 57)

With regards to the school of representation acting approach which I posit is the Practical Aesthetic approach, Stanislavski explained its justification as such:

The theatre is a convention and the stage is too poor in resources to create the illusion of life, therefore the theatre should not avoid conventions...This type of art is less profound than beautiful, it is more immediately effective than truly powerful, in it the form is more interesting than its content. It acts more on your sense of sound and sight than on your soul. Consequently it is more likely to delight than to move you. (Stanislavski 24)

Stanislavski's approach can be differentiated from the viewpoint of the Scottish Practical Aesthetic practitioner Mark Westbrook as,

Practical Aesthetics (PA) is writer-centered, the creator is the writer, they do the job of making things up, the actor is a creative interpreter but not a creator in the same way that a writer is. Method Acting (whatever that means) is more actor centered. We [practitioners of Practical Aesthetics] are most interested in serving the writing, this cannot be said of the Method Actor, who creates a character built from details of the script but also from their imagination. They may also serve the writer, but they do so by trying to create a 'truthful' fully dimensional character. (ActingCoachScotland.com)

Because of my limited experience with such opposing acting approaches, I have difficulty understanding how this works in a true performance. However, I can understand how actors who do not have a depth of emotion would prefer Practical Aesthetics.

One point I should mention is that before I taught my own undergraduate classes, I assisted two adjunct professors who use *The Practical Handbook for the Actor* as their text. In that book, there are nine criteria that an action must possess in order for it to be useful to an actor. Each time, the students would take tests on these nine points and most passed the tests. However, I did not see that translate into actually being able to choose an action, and down the line, actually execute that action. This was evident in the classes I had to take which combined undergraduates with graduate students. These actors would rise to advanced level classes, such as Styles or Shakespearean scene work, and still be unaware of what an action is.

Incidentally, I used Uta Hagen's text to teach my class. I would assign a chapter from her book *Respect for Acting*, and a homework exercise that my students had to present the following classes. We worked on finding the facet of themselves that is just like whatever particular character they were working on. To limit unnecessary search for appropriate plays with characters that are fitting, I used one play, *Boy's Life*, by Howard Korder. Everyone does the exact same scene so that if a scene partner doesn't show up, another actor can fill in and no one misses a chance to present. An additional benefit to using only one script for the entire class is that everyone has the opportunity to do deep thought-provoking analysis, from the setting, the time and place, to the history of their character.

The unexpected beauty of this system was that everyone saw multiple interpretations of the same character and was able to process these different interpretations without judgement. Each actor brought their true selves to their character and no two performances were even similar. It is these varying readings on the exact same character that highlights the uniqueness of everyone and suggest that this uniqueness be celebrated not eliminated. As Ed Bullins is quoted as saying in the *Development of the Black Theatre*, and as has been the case not only in film, television and theatre arts but across the board in all sectors, all too often “The insistence on familiarity is, more accurately, a refusal to allow those perceived as Other their uniqueness.” (Sanders 16)

I contend that it is this refusal to acknowledge the value of the uniqueness of others and their experience that is one of the two elements of non-traditional casting which continue to support the domination of whites and the subordination of non-whites. The other element is the cultural appropriation of white theatre makers, which theatre creator and arts educator Nisha Ahuja describes as the “taking a symbol or cultural practice out of its original context and then plunking it down somewhere else. And it becomes devoid of its original meaning. The people who are doing the extraction often are benefiting, whether through personal gain, financial gain, or entertainment.” (YouTube.com)

In the first circumstance of non-traditional casting, wherein actors of color are cast in roles written as white characters, the assumption is, as I mentioned previously Professor Hoover once described to me, the white character is a “regular” person. It therefore follows that the person of color

possesses irregular or abnormal traits. Additionally, inherent in that assumption is that those abnormal traits are invaluable and should be discarded in favor of “normal,” and therefore superior, white traits.

Oddly, in the case of cultural appropriation of non-traditional casting, whereby white actors play characters who are people of color, those very same traits that identify “otherness” as opposed to whiteness are perceived as a superficial accoutrement that can be added or subtracted as needed.

Additionally, I assert that it is the belief inherent in the conflicting narratives of non-traditional casting (that uniqueness is insignificant and, simultaneously, that whatever differences exist are extrinsic and can be acquired at will), prevent the development of theatre, film and television, that reflect the truth of a culturally rich, global society. Industry-wide, the backlash to non-traditional casting comes from the sense that the experiences and perceptions of people of color are not significantly different enough to warrant financial support for the development of theatre by, for and about people of color. (AmericanTheatre.com) Mainstream (i.e. white) theatre companies that cast the occasional role non-traditionally or periodically produce a play by and about people of color are able to claim that they are a diverse and inclusive organization which gives them the eligibility to apply and accept funds set aside to support projects by, for and about people of color. This prevents organizations that are legitimately focused on projects created about and for people of color from receiving the funding that would give them the ability to produce and tell their own stories about their own people. (LosAngelesTimes.com)

According to American Theatre senior editor Diep Tran, cultural appropriation in theatre not only limits the development of theatre for people of color, but it is also disrespectful of the cultural

traditions of people of color that become “metaphors or fantasy worlds or backdrops for white narratives.” She goes on to say:

It’s about the subsuming of a minority ethnic group to support the narrative of a dominant ethnic group. It is relegating any trace of non-white ethnicity to set dressing, while not employing people of color as performers or on your creative team. It’s putting white actors in kimonos or leather dresses so that white artists can have a conversation about white culture with white audiences. It’s frolicking in a fantasy place and pretending the people who live in the actual place don’t exist. You are not important enough to be respected. You don’t deserve a voice onstage. You are nothing but objects to us. (AmericanTheatre.com)

In evaluating the practice of cultural appropriation in theatre, recognizing that the disconnect white Americans may feel can provide a better understanding. Shelly Tochluk, author of *Witnessing Whiteness*, explains that:

I benefit when feeling connected to something ancient, like when I read old Germanic fairytales and feel somehow related to them. I will continue exploring my ethnicity as I move forward, searching for fragments of a culture long lost to my family— For the truth is that my cultural connection is lost; I am not German. That culture is too disconnected. My Germanness was traded in long ago for the benefits available in this country for European immigrants able to fit into the white group. Feeling connected

with my ancestry is essential, but I cannot kid myself into believing that I share the same culture as contemporary Germans. I do not...

White people who cannot fully recapture a lost cultural heritage, like myself, often experience a real sense of loss. Sure, there might be subcultures of whites that feel attached to what they see as a particularly American culture, like those who would claim a 'Southern' culture. However, many of us find ourselves looking at other groups and longing for the connection we imagine they feel with their roots, their homeland, their culture. Many white people can be heard saying, 'We don't have culture. They have culture.'" (aorta.coop)

This approach to traditional black and brown cultures has taken place throughout modern history. Films of the 20th century can provide quite a few examples such as Katherine Hepburn playing the Chinese heroine "Jade Tan" in *Dragon Seed*, (1944), Mickey Rooney as "Mr. Yunioshi" in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), and Elizabeth Taylor in the title role of *Cleopatra* (1963).

(WashingtonPost.com) More recently and in theatre, an extreme example of cultural appropriation is evidenced in Hungary's 2018 production of *Porgy and Bess*, in which all of the actors were required to claim African ancestry in order to legally skirt the requirement of the Gershwin estate that the work be performed by an all-black cast. (WashingtonPost.com)

Another outlandish example of cultural appropriation was the 2018 production of renown Quebec director Robert Lepage's play entitled *SLAV*, "which included a mostly white cast picking



cotton and singing black slave songs.” Once the show was cancelled, Lepage acknowledged in a public letter the “clumsiness and misjudgements” regarding the production. He added that he had met with a group of black artists and activists concerning the show who, “Unlike the angry far-left extremists depicted in certain media, the people I met with were welcoming, open, perceptive, intelligent, cultivated, articulate and peaceful.” (GlobalNews.ca) As a person of color who has been told she is articulate and that any slight that I may have perceived was merely insensitivity on the offenders part and extreme sensitivity on my part, I will outright call this explanation bullshit. From my point of view, the words Lepage used to describe his own actions and thought processes regarding *SLAV*, “clumsiness and misjudgements,” are indicative of a level of his callousness and resistance to understand the significance of his maliciousness. In addition, the words “intelligent,” “cultivated,” “articulate” and “peaceful” are frequently used by racist white people to describe black people. It is often said with a lilt of surprise and it indicates that their starting premise is that black people do not possess these qualities. I contend that if both of these elements, the outward maliciousness and the hidden disparaging of people of color, are not addressed immediately when they arise this type of white supremacist behavior will continue.

I often use an example from the white woman’s liberation movement to highlight changes society (white patriarchy) can make when forced: At one point, “Nice tits” was a compliment until white women demanded the respect they believed they deserved. I hold that it is the same with people of color who have been and still are demanding respect.

Recently the production of *Hamilton* by Lin Manuel uses non-traditional casting to cast people of color in roles that were the white founding fathers of the United States. The audition notice specifically called for actors and dancers of color. On the surface this seems like a brilliant exercise in inclusion and diversity, however it comes at a cost. Truth is not honored and when the truth is not honored falsities proliferate. As African-American writer and activist Ishmael Reed accurately entitles a piece he wrote about the show, “Hamilton: Black People Dressing Up as Slave Owners and it’s not Halloween.” Without the knowledge that every person of color who portrayed a founding father was in essence also portraying elite white men who purchased, owned and sold black people as slaves, the story of *Hamilton* becomes as the lies that were told, and in many places are still being told, to black and white children regarding slavery. In general these lies can be summed up into these three points, that 1) the slaves were better off as slaves in the United States than as savages in Africa, 2) slave owners treated their slaves kindly. It was the rare mean slave owner that beat his slaves, 3) the slaves were happy, as was recently reported in this March 19, 2019 article from *The Advocate*, a Louisiana-owned newspaper:

The slaves, according to the exhibit, were awoken at 4 a.m. in their “prettily built and very comfortable” cabins to begin work by dawn. “The slaves were well taken care of and happy,” the exhibit sign continues. At Christmas, the slaves gathered because they “have a natural musical instinct. It was wonderful how well they succeeded in their melodies.”

## CONCLUSION

Because this thesis was more of a fact-finding mission rather than a controlled, hypothetical experiment with independent and dependent variables, I failed to plan for a conclusion. Until two days ago, the only solution I could formulate to the controversial and adversarial practice of non-traditional casting in film, television and theatre was: make better people. Those three words, “make better people,” taunted me. After all of this research and introspection I wanted to cut and paste a Cited Works page together, email this document to my Major Professor, Professor Gow, and then find a beach. I did not want to ask myself “How?” I wanted to leave that up to anyone else. But, because I believe I have 1) enough life experiences at 50 years of age and having traveled a fair amount, 2) a wide range of friends from different races, religions, cultures, genders and sexualities, and most importantly, 3) had the unique and enlightening experience of having lived unknowingly with a modicum of white privilege when my hair was relaxed, going through a physical and mental transition of going natural, and now living as clearly an unapologetic, black woman, I am able to provide rare insight into the dangers of non-traditional casting. These factors also guide me when searching for solutions.

As has been the subject of this document and ensuing research, I assert that one of the main detractors of the practice of non-traditional casting may fail to acknowledge the truth and celebrate the differences of the human race. Thus, it contributes to the oppression of the oppressed and to the power of the oppressors. In order to combat the imbalance of power among the various groups that make up the human race, a recognition of the inherent worth of each and every culture, race, religion, gender or sexuality must be accepted, promoted and then protected. To achieve this, white culture must be analyzed, not as the baseline to measure the human experience but as a multifaceted phenomenon as are all other cultures.

Corporate and academic entities have been conducting training on cultural sensitivity for many years. Recently, however, a new element of cultural training has been added, the study of white culture. Previously, white culture was the litmus test for all other cultures. Cultures have been identified, assessed and then labeled over the years with the one exception being white culture. These corporate and academic classes were structured using the white experience as the baseline to compare all other cultural experiences. Now, by acknowledging and learning about white culture in the same context as other cultures, the participants begin to have a more concrete understanding of their clients or students with different cultural traditions and beliefs. (EuroAmerican.org)

To demonstrate, I will use the universal example of identity. Typically in white culture one's identity is believed to be unique and *independent*, "a unitary, living source of decisions, choices, and actions that stands (or should eventually stand) by itself (Greenfield, et al., 2003; Rogoff, 2003)." (Courses.LumenLearning.com) Contrary to this belief is the following belief of the *interdependent self* that many non-white cultures hold to be true: the "belief that it is relationships and responsibilities, and not uniqueness and autonomy, that defines a person." (Courses.LumenLearning.com)

The results of these conflicting beliefs about identity (the independent ideal self versus an interdependent ideal self) manifest in a variety of ways but the following three indicate the types of challenges faced in a multicultural society:

1. *Preference for activities that are cooperative rather than competitive*
2. *Avoidance of standing out publicly*

3. *The importance of Interpersonal time (building relationships) versus clock time*

(Courses.LumenLearning.com)

This example is only one of the plethora of possibilities for miscommunication and misunderstanding between the dominant, white culture and the black and brown cultures that have been subjugated to it. In regard to film, television and theatre, which are forms of communication through theatrical performance, it must be acknowledged that the communication has been one-sided.

In addition, white culture has been responsible for much of the destruction and maladies throughout the world. Climate change is the most discussed phenomenon stemming from capitalist ideals which many consider the foundation of white culture. Most recently, the World Health Organization has declared “workplace burn-out” an official diagnosable, treatable syndrome which I put forth is a product of the “win at all costs” and “your worth is your wealth” values of white culture which are uncharacteristic of non-white cultures. (Cascadia.com)

To conclude, the creators of film, television and theatre - the majority of who are members of the dominate, white culture - must recognize that the performers they hire and, in more importantly the audiences they serve, have traditions and experiences with inherent value without regard to being compared to white culture. In addition, members of white culture need to be made aware that their traditions and experiences are not more universal or valuable than those of black and brown people. Consequently, their stories are not more truthful.

## ADDITIONAL NOTES

1. Given I experienced performance issues with the theatre productions at UNO, it is fair to say that my theories on acting appear incongruent with those touted by Professor Hoover. I had hoped to build on my acting theory repertoire in my classes, not be berated for embracing a divergent theory, given that UNO is an institution of higher learning.
2. I inquired multiple times with both departmental faculty and the Graduate School, but there is at this time no outline of specified requirements for a thesis in the theatre division. There are no requirements of length or content, save this quote from the *Graduate STUDENT HANDBOOK*, whose cover contains a portrait of Shakespeare, given to me by Professor Hoover: “In consultation with the Major Professor the production will be documented in written form.” I believe my thesis documents not only the original assigned production of *Keely and Du* but also the subsequent roles which replaced this production. However, my thesis varies from those of past years in that it is more an academic approach to describing my process than the (in my opinion, nebulous) journal-like entries of those I reviewed. I was frankly surprised by the lack of academic rigor, what I would describe as the puerile quality of what passed at a master’s level. To be clear, I asked Professor Hoover at the time for permission to explore the topic of non-traditional casting under the paradigm of me being cast as “Walter,” and his response was that everything has already been said about the process and that I would not have anything to add. He did, however, agree to allow me to continue with this topic.

3. My self-critique burgeoned from merely a documentation “in written form” to a treatise on how I experienced Theatre UNO’s training program with its inherent assumption that African-American and other cultures’ stories are less valid than those written by dead white guys (like Shakespeare)--our stories are devalued by the assertion that “Universal Truth” equates white society’s viewpoints and stories exclusively. The major example being Professor Hoover’s plan that I should play “Du” for my thesis role--his assumption that anyone can play anything. Professor Gow’s offering of the role of Walter and the noble attempt to “turn the play on its head” also failed for the same reasons I believe. This assumption of color-blind casting as a solution, I feel I have disproven with examples like Lepage’s *Slav* and the Hungarian production of *Porgy*. If it’s considered misappropriation of Black culture when Whites play slaves, then how can the reverse also not be true? There are roles that are specific to cultural norms and, given that color-blind casting changes the playwright’s obvious intention, should not be assumed to maintain the story’s meanings and implications.
4. *How the Mediocre White Male Trope as the Exemplar of Human Experience and Universal Truth Fails to Adequately Prepare the Diverse Field of Contemporary Actors and Audiences in Film, Television and Theatre Today* is my process paper that goes beyond merely notions on acting theory and picks at the very roots of societal assumptions and the pillars upon which Western theatre is built. I believe that my experiences are likely similar to other non-white-actors and I intend to speak out on what I see as true cultural celebration rather than the ineffectual bandage of color-blind casting as a compromise to offer roles to People of Color.

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